Libertarianism vs Conservatism: Two Diverging Visions of Society

By Joshua D Glawson

In American politics, libertarians and conservatives often find themselves marching in the same direction, against socialism, against government overreach, against centralized control.

But once the immediate threats are behind us, the path splits. Beneath the alliance lies a deeper tension: conservatism and libertarianism are not interchangeable.

Libertarianism and Conservatism are two distinct worldviews with different priorities, moral foundations, and visions of what constitutes a good society.

Though allies in rhetoric, they often become opponents in principle. Understanding where and why they diverge is critical if we care about the future of liberty in America.

Foundations: Tradition vs. Individual Liberty

Conservatism is rooted in preservation: of culture, of customs, of institutions. The conservative believes that societal wisdom is accumulated over generations and that disrupting tradition leads to chaos.

Edmund Burke, often considered the father of modern conservatism, viewed society as a fragile contract passed between generations. He warned of radical change and put his trust in slow, evolutionary progress anchored in time-tested norms.

Libertarianism, by contrast, is rooted in individual liberty. Our tradition does not fear change if it is voluntary and peaceful.

We often draw from John Locke's natural rights philosophy: every individual has the right to life, liberty, and property, and governments are legitimate only when they protect these rights with the consent of the governed.

From a minarchist perspective, liberty is understood as the natural condition in which individuals are free to act as they choose, so long as they do not initiate force or fraud against others.

In this view, liberty is not absolute license, but the peaceful exercise of autonomy within a system that protects rights through minimal government. The state exists only to secure these rights through basic functions like courts, police, and national defense. It does not exist to mold culture, redistribute wealth, or engineer virtue.

The sovereignty of individuals is imperative for any justification of the sovereignty of the state. The state has no moral authority of its own; it only inherits what has been delegated by free, peaceful individuals. Sovereignty flows from the bottom up,

not the top down. It is not granted by the state to the people; it is granted by the people to the state, and only conditionally.

This is not a novel claim. It is foundational to the Western liberal tradition. John Locke warned that when the state betrays the rights of the people it is meant to protect, it becomes an aggressor, not a guardian.

In The Second Treatise of Government, Locke argued that when a government breaks its trust—by violating property, suppressing liberty, or denying consent—it forfeits its legitimacy, and the people have the right to alter or abolish it.

In libertarian thought, this is not a rhetorical flourish. It is a moral boundary. When the state violates the sovereignty of free and peaceful individuals, it is in violation of natural rights and no longer operating within the bounds of legitimate authority.

Conservatives ask: what will preserve order?

Libertarians ask: what protects liberty?

The Role of Government

Conservatives support limited government in theory but are more likely to endorse state action to preserve morality, social cohesion, and national identity. From banning certain substances to promoting religious values in public schools, conservatives often rely on the state as a moral enforcer.

Libertarians oppose coercive power, period. We hold that the state should never initiate force against peaceful individuals, even when a majority believes it's for their own good. That includes resisting attempts to legislate virtue, control markets, or police private behavior.

Freedom is not the absence of chaos; it is the presence of individual sovereignty. You cannot force a free society into existence with laws, mandates, or cultural paternalism.

Rights Theory: Consistency vs. Selectivity

This divide becomes especially clear in how each tradition understands rights.

Libertarians overwhelmingly adhere to Natural Rights Theory, the idea that individuals possess inherent rights to life, liberty, and property that precede government and do not depend on majority approval. These are *negative rights*, meaning they only require others to refrain from interference, not to provide goods or services.

Conservatives, however, often shift between Natural Rights and Positive Rights depending on the issue. They may appeal to natural rights when defending gun ownership or religious liberty, but invoke positive rights when calling for government-enforced national service, law-and-order crackdowns, or subsidies to culturally favored institutions.

This inconsistency undermines the principle of equal liberty. Libertarians maintain that if a “right” requires the government to violate someone else’s liberty or property, it is not a right at all; it is a claim to someone else’s labor, money, or autonomy.

In our view, government’s only legitimate purpose is to protect natural rights, not to invent new ones, redistribute them, or trade them for cultural comfort.

Economics: Free Markets in Principle vs. Free Markets When Convenient

Both schools claim to support free enterprise. But when the political winds shift, their differences emerge.

Conservatives will support tariffs, subsidies, or industrial policy when it serves national interest or political allies. We saw this clearly during Trump’s administration and again in his 2025 anti-capitalism tariff revival. The conservative rationale is often pragmatic: “protect American jobs,” punish adversarial nations, rebuild domestic industry.

But libertarians reject this inconsistency. A free market is a moral commitment, not just an economic theory. Tariffs are hidden taxes that punish consumers and distort peaceful exchange. Voluntary trade between people—even across borders—is a natural right. As Milton Friedman explained, the damage from tariffs is widespread, subtle, and long-lasting.

Conservatives may use markets to reach an end. Libertarians believe markets are an end in themselves, because they respect consent and reward value creation.

Social Policy and Personal Autonomy

Here lies perhaps the most visible fault line.

Conservatives often seek to protect traditional values through legislation, whether it’s laws against drug use, bans on same-sex marriage, or restrictions on speech they consider harmful or “un-American.” They argue that freedom without morality leads to decadence.

Libertarians agree that a moral society is desirable, but we reject the idea that government should define or enforce morality. Personal responsibility, not state intervention, is the foundation of a free society. Whether someone chooses a risky lifestyle, holds controversial beliefs, or defies convention, they remain a sovereign individual, entitled to liberty and protection from state interference.

As long as people remain peaceful and do not infringe on the natural rights of others, they should be tolerated and their personal autonomy should remain intact. This toleration does not imply coerced acceptance by the state or society, only that others within society and the government have no authority to harm them.

Conservatives say: some things should not be tolerated.

Libertarians say: tolerance is the price of liberty.

Foreign Policy and the Use of Force

Conservatives tend to support a strong national defense and assertive foreign policy. Many believe America must project power to protect its values and interests abroad. This has led to support for military interventions, foreign aid to allied governments, and an expansive global footprint.

Libertarians, following the lead of Ron Paul and others, reject interventionism. We believe that the primary role of the military is to defend the homeland, not to police the world. Foreign entanglements drain resources, provoke retaliation, and entrench the very centralized power we seek to resist.

Peaceful commerce, not military dominance, is the best way to promote liberty globally.

Constitutional Philosophy

Conservatives often invoke the Constitution as a sacred document, but many support broad interpretations when it aligns with their priorities, such as executive action on immigration, national security, or trade. They talk about "originalism," but are quick to justify exceptions for emergencies or national greatness.

Libertarians, by contrast, treat the Constitution as a limiting charter, not a blank check. We believe that even when the ends are noble, the means must remain constitutional, decentralized, and accountable. We do not believe the president is a king, or that Congress can legislate away our rights.

Some may argue that being both constitutional and decentralized presents a contradiction. It does not. A properly limited Constitution, like the one envisioned by the American Founders, distributes and restrains power precisely to prevent centralization. Federalism, enumerated powers, and the Bill of Rights all serve to protect individual liberty by keeping power fragmented and local.

In the libertarian view, a written Constitution is valuable only insofar as it limits government and prevents consolidation. Decentralization is not at odds with constitutionalism—it is its most faithful application.

Conservatives sometimes see government as a necessary tool. Libertarians see it as a dangerous servant—and a fearful master.

Cultural Outlook

Conservatives are often motivated by a sense of cultural loss. They look around and see decay: weakened families, secular values, rising crime, and globalist ideology. Their instinct is to protect, to preserve, and, if necessary, to wield state power to recover what was lost.

Libertarians see cultural change as inevitable—and not necessarily a threat. We don’t fear pluralism or experimentation, because we trust free people to build better lives without needing a central script. Libertarians view diversity of values as a strength, so long as no one is forced to accept or subsidize someone else’s lifestyle.

We do not wish to roll back the clock. We wish to roll back the state.

Final Thoughts: Order or Freedom?

At their core, conservatives and libertarians part ways on the question: is the purpose of government to preserve order or to secure liberty?

Conservatives often conclude that freedom must be subordinated to virtue. Libertarians believe that freedom is the precondition for virtue. Without voluntary choice, moral behavior is hollow and imposed.

From a minarchist libertarian perspective, freedom, or *liberty*, is not utopianism or chaos—it is a principled system of non-aggression, self-ownership, and voluntary exchange, supported by a minimal state whose sole duty is to protect those rights and nothing more.

While we may theoretically continue to work alongside conservatives against socialism, censorship, and central planning, we must never lose sight of the moral, philosophical, economic, and political differences that set us apart.

Liberty is not a subset of conservatism. It is its own proud tradition—one grounded in individual rights, peaceful exchange, and personal responsibility.

Let us never confuse proximity for unity.

Libertarianism stands on its own.